

Moore's Paradox and Assertion

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Abstract

If I were to say, “Agnes does not know that it is raining, but it is,” this seems like a perfectly coherent way of describing Agnes’s epistemic position. If I were to add, “And I don’t know if it is, either,” this seems quite strange. In this chapter, we shall look at some statements that seem, in some sense, contradictory, even though it seems that these statements can express propositions that are contingently true or false. Moore thought it was paradoxical that statements that can express true propositions or contingently false propositions should nevertheless seem absurd like this. If we can account for the absurdity, we shall solve Moore’s Paradox. In this chapter, we shall look at Moore’s proposals and more recent discussions of Moorean absurd thought and speech.

Keywords: Assertion, Norm of Assertion, Moore's Paradox, Norm of Belief, Knowledge Norm, Epistemic Norm

1. Introduction

Moore observed that it would be “absurd” to assert the following:

1. I put the duck in the oven, but I don’t believe that I did.
2. I bought the gin, but I believe that I didn’t.
3. None of the guests will be late, but I don’t know if they’ll be on time.

They seem absurd and, at first, might appear to be contradictory. They do not, however, seem to express contradictions.¹ And this, Moore thought, was paradoxical (1993, 208). If we state such things in the past tense or say such things about others, it's clear that they can seem perfectly coherent and state the truth. Why, then, do they seem absurd as stated?

Moore wrote little about the paradox that bears his name, but his brief remarks seem like a natural place to start. In a manuscript published only posthumously, he suggested that (1) *implies*

¹ This assumption has been contested. Drawing on work by Veltman (1996) on epistemic modals, Gillies (2001) shows that (1) is inconsistent in an update semantics framework. Here is a crude statement of the proposal. Think of the information state at the start of a conversational exchange in terms of the possibilities that are ruled out by the evidence/knowledge of the speakers and those that are not. If a speaker asserts p , think of that as something that rules out all the $\sim p$ -possibilities. (And recall that these are epistemic possibilities, so we're interested in information, knowledge, and evidence of some speaker or speakers.) If a speaker says, "It might be that $\sim p$," think of that as saying that the $\sim p$ -possibilities are not ruled out. If a speaker's saying "I don't believe p " is treated as saying that $\sim p$ is possible, the effect of asserting (1) would be to update the information state in such a way that the $\sim p$ -possibilities are ruled and are not ruled out—hence the inconsistency. Extending this treatment to (3) might be easy, provided that we assume that what's known is epistemically necessary. Extending this treatment to (2) would be easy if we could assume that the assertion that some speaker believes $\sim p$ has a similar effect as stating that it might be that $\sim p$. Gillies doesn't discuss (2) or (3) and readers shouldn't assume that this extension is nontrivial. The contributions discussed here all assume that (1)–(3) are consistent and many contributors insist that the Moorean absurdities are consistent. For my part, I think this stipulation is a bit odd. It might well be that there are absurd inconsistencies that are absurd for the same reason that some consistent Moorean absurdities are. If there are also some nonabsurd inconsistencies (e.g., denials of true a posteriori identities?), we could use our account of consistent Moorean absurdities to shed light on the difference between absurd and non-absurd inconsistencies.

something distinct from the proposition that it expresses or what the speaker asserts.² When a speaker asserts p , he says, this *expresses* the proposition that p (and so what is said is true iff p). In saying this, the speaker also *implies* that she believes that p . We see that (1) has this form: p and I do not believe that p . Because the speaker asserts, inter alia, that p and that she does not believe that p , she asserts something that clashes with something she implies. In assertively uttering (1), the speaker implies that she believes that p even though she asserts that she does not believe that p . The absurdity, it would seem, is connected to the fact that the speaker asserts and/or implies that she believes and does not believe that she has put the duck in the oven.

Moore offers a different treatment of (2). It isn't clear whether he noticed that (1) and (2) have different form, but let's note it now:

$$(1f) p \ \& \ \sim Bp$$

$$(2f) p \ \& \ B\sim p$$

The omissive case is (1f), and (2f) is the commissive case. Although they seem to present similar problems, it turns out to be difficult to give a uniform treatment of these cases. In discussing the commissive case, Moore proposed that in asserting p , we imply (in his special sense) that we don't believe that $\sim p$ (1959, 176). Thus, in asserting the first conjunct of (2), we imply that we don't believe $\sim p$. In asserting the second conjunct of (2), we assert that we *do* believe $\sim p$. Thus, in asserting (2), we assert and/or imply that we do and do not believe $\sim p$. The absurdity, yet again, would seem to be connected to the fact that the speaker asserts and/or implies that she

² More recent authors have suggested something similar in saying that when a speaker asserts p , she represents herself as standing in some relation to p (e.g., belief, knowledge) without asserting that she stands in that relation. For discussion of the idea that a speaker who asserts p represents herself as believing p , see Black (1952). For discussion of the idea that the speaker represents herself as knowing p , see Slote (1979) and Unger (1975).

has and lacks a certain belief. The route to this result differs. It rests on a second purported link between assertion and the attitudes that the speaker implies she has when she asserts something.

I see three potential problems with Moore's approach to his paradox. His proposal might seem inelegant, mysterious, and/or incomplete. It might seem inelegant because he has to offer at least two accounts of the absurdity to handle the cases. He might need to introduce further assumptions as new forms of Moorean absurdity are discovered (e.g., (3)). It might seem mysterious because it is unclear why we should accept his claims about what we imply when we assert. It is also unclear how this undertheorized notion of what's implied could account for the resultant absurdity. Finally, the proposal seems incomplete in at least two ways. First, the account does not cover (3). Does a speaker imply that she knows p if she asserts p ? If we discover new forms of Moorean absurdity, will we have to posit additional things that a speaker implies to account for these new forms of absurdity? It also gives us no account of Moorean absurd belief or thought. It would be absurd to believe (1) or (2), not just to assert them.³ How would Moore's proposal about assertion, implication, and belief help us understand why it is fine for me to believe that there is a duck in the oven that you don't believe is in the oven but not for me to believe that there is a duck in the oven that I don't believe is in the oven?

We need an account that covers Moorean absurd thought as well as speech. It seems *prima facie* plausible that any account that explains why it would be absurd to believe (1) or (2) should help us see why it would be absurd to assert (1) or (2). It doesn't seem *prima facie* plausible that the converse is true. It would be oddly self-defeating for someone to say, "Nobody is speaking now." There is nothing inherently odd about believing such a thing. If we had an account of Moorean absurd thought, it would seem that this should give us an account of Moorean absurd speech, but we shouldn't expect the converse to be so (Shoemaker 1996, 76).

³ Sorensen (1988).

It seems that a natural plan of attack would be as follows. We start by looking at different accounts of absurd belief or thought. On the assumption that an account of absurd thought would cover the case of absurd speech (but not vice-versa), we should start here. We shall then examine the bridge principle, the assumptions about the link between assertion and belief that would support this methodological choice. It turns out that the methodological assumption isn't as innocent as it might first appear. Finally, we shall look at Moorean absurd speech in its own right.

2. On Belief

In this section, we shall look at proposed accounts of the irrationality of Moorean absurd thought.

2.1. Contradictory Attitudes

To account for the absurdity of asserting (1) or (2), Moore appealed to relations between our assertions and the various things we imply about our higher order beliefs. While this account clearly won't cover the case of Moorean absurd thought, the idea that we should look at the relations that hold between first-order and higher order beliefs to understand this puzzling phenomenon looked to some like a good one.

Consider Hintikka (1962) and Heal's (1994) approach to (1) and (2). To account for the absurdity of (1f), the ommissive case, Hintikka (1962) appealed to positive introspection for belief:

Positive Introspection: If a thinker believes p , she believes that she believes p .

Thus, if a thinker believed, say, that she put the duck in the oven, she also would believe that she believes this. Thus, if there were a thinker who believed (1), he would both believe that he believed p and that he did not believe p .⁴

To account for cases like (2), Heal (1994) appealed to the idea that some second-order beliefs are immune to error:

Doxastic Infallibility: If a thinker believes that she believes that p , she believes that p .

If a thinker did believe (2f), she would both believe p (because she believes each conjunct of a conjunctive belief) and believe $\sim p$ (because she believes that she believes this and Doxastic Infallibility tells us that this belief cannot be mistaken).

By appeal to these levels principles, Hintikka and Heal argue that if a thinker were to believe something with the form of (1f) or (2f), she would have to have contradictory beliefs. It is important, says Heal, that we identify some contradiction or something contradiction-like that's associated with (1) or (2) to solve the paradox (1994, 6). This contradictory or contradiction-like combination of attitudes accounts for the relevant kind of absurdity. For Hintikka, the presence of the contradiction means that beliefs of the form (1f) are “necessarily *unbelievable* by the speaker” (1962, 67). On this point, Heal demurs. On her view, the presence of something contradictory or contradiction-like is a manifestation of irrationality, not a psychological impossibility (1994, 11).

⁴ Because Hintikka's proposal is a proposal about idealized thinkers, it is not clear how it covers the actual case involving grotty thinkers like us. One concern we might have about this approach is that if we know that belief is nonluminous (thanks to our careful reading of [Williamson \[2000\]](#)), we should expect that if for each p we believed we would believe that we believed that, we should also expect that there would be some p where we believed that we believed it but did not know that we believed it. Since Williamson's results seem to hold also for Hintikka's idealized thinkers, it seems that Hintikka's idealized thinkers would contravene the norm that we should not believe what we do not know.

We now face two important questions in our approach to Moorean absurdity. First, does Moorean absurdity arise because of contradictory or contradictory-like attitudes? Second, is the absurdity best accounted for in terms of what is psychologically possible or in terms of what is consistent with the requirements of rationality? Let's start with the idea that Moorean absurdities are absurd because they would have to involve the presence of some contradictory or contradictory-like attitudes. Bracketing the question about whether it's possible to have such attitudes or whether rationality requires us not to have such attitudes, we should notice that the arguments that purport to show that Moorean absurdity would have to involve such attitudes involves assumptions about the relationship between first-order and higher order belief that might seem controversial. Positive introspection, for example, might be challenged on the grounds that we have little independent evidence to believe that we have the hierarchy of higher order attitudes required by Hintikka's proposal. We might make some progress here by proposing some kind of constrained positive introspection principle, such as one that applies only to conscious belief. On the assumption that Moorean absurdity arises only when we're dealing with matters sufficiently close to consciousness to impact on rationality, the restriction seems natural and seems to weaken Hintikka's proposal in just the right place. Alas, even if it helps us handle (1), the lesson to learn from Moore's proposal is that this move only removes an objection to Hintikka's treatment of (1) and doesn't give us the tools we need to address (2), (3), or further variants considered later. Moreover, it does nothing to address the problems that might arise for Doxastic Infallibility. There is little about which we cannot make rational mistakes. It would seem that I might falsely believe, say, that I don't believe in ghosts because I'm able to represent myself to my own satisfaction as a naturalist, one who believes in science and dismisses as silly all talk of the supernatural. And yet, I wouldn't spend the night in a graveyard for a small sum of money. Maybe this is some evidence that I do believe what I would have thought I don't believe. If I can falsely believe that I don't believe p , it isn't clear why I should assume that I cannot falsely believe that I do believe p . Moreover, we know that people

can suffer from conceptual confusions about belief and still possess the concept of belief sufficiently well to believe that they believe things. I've heard tales of philosophers who believe that a thinker believes p if she is more confident that p than she is that $\sim p$. I think this is a very silly view of belief, but who am I to say that a philosopher in the grips of a theory couldn't believe falsely that she believes p because she knows that she thinks p is more likely than not?

Another obstacle to the idea that we need contradictory attitudes to have Moorean absurdity comes not from the problematic principles linking first-order to higher order beliefs, but from the challenge of finding contradictory attitudes to handle cases with this form:

$$(3f) p \ \& \ \sim Kp$$

Perhaps one way to think about the case is as follows. The judgment that one doesn't know whether p might be a way of suspending judgment on p . Perhaps we can see suspending on whether p and believing p as being contradictory-like and this would fit Heal's description.

Let's consider the issue separating Hintikka's approach from Heal's approach, whether the absurdity is due to the fact that no thinker can have the problematic set of attitudes, or whether it is due to the fact that any thinker who had such attitudes would violate some requirement of rationality. On this point, it seems that Heal's approach might enjoy an important advantage. There would appear to be cases where, say, in therapy someone has been convinced by a therapist that she believes something that she consciously rejects.⁵ As long as these stories are coherent, it seems unwise to place too much weight on the idea that the Moorean absurdities are absurd because no thinker can exhibit the mental profile that she would appear to if she were to assert (1)–(3). Thus, it might be wise to see Moorean absurdity as arising from some kind of flagrant violation of the requirements rationality rather than some kind of psychological impossibility.

⁵ For discussion of such cases and the difference between commitment and the detached perspective, see

Moran (1997). We shall discuss the significance of these cases in [section 2](#).

2.2. Contravening Normative Standards

In much of the recent work on the paradox, many of us have operated on the assumption that the key to understanding the absurdity has been to identify some kind of norm or requirement of rationality that has been contravened by any thinker who would have the attitudes associated with (1)–(3) or further absurd combinations. This might cover the cases where there is some combination of contradictory attitudes (e.g., when a thinker knows a priori that some complex attitude is composed of contradictory commitments), but it might cover other cases besides.

A natural place to start might be with Douven's (2006, 2009) approach.⁶ He appeals to three claims about rational belief that seem *prima facie* plausible:

RB1: If a thinker rationally believes $(p \ \& \ q)$, she rationally believes p .

RB2: If a thinker rationally believes p , she is more confident in p than in $\sim p$.

RB3: If a thinker rationally believes p , she is at least as confident that she believes p as she is that she does not believe p .

From these three assumptions, he shows that it is not possible to rationally believe (1).⁷ It is far from clear how this approach generalizes to cover (2).⁸ To cover, (3), Douven proposes adding an additional rule:

⁶ For alternative accounts of Moorean absurd belief that focus on justification and/or evidence, see [Adler \(2002\)](#), [de Almeida \(2001\)](#), [Fernandez \(2005\)](#), and [Williams \(1996\)](#).

⁷ Suppose that a rational thinker's credences obey the probability axioms. Recall that (1) has this form: $(p \ \& \ \sim Bp)$. If a thinker believes this rationally, by RB1 she rationally believes p and also rationally believes that she does not believe p . If this second belief is rational, RB2 tells us that she must be more confident that she does not believe p than she is that she does. However, if she is more confident that she does not believe p , we have located the source of the problem. Because she is taken to rationally believe p , RB3 says that she must be at least as confident that she believes p as she is that she does not.

RB4: If a thinker rationally believes p , she is at least as confident that she knows p as she is that she does not know p .⁹

One reason that this rule seems necessary is that it is hard to see the denial of knowledge as clashing with the belief that p in the way that, say, the belief that $\sim p$ or the belief that p is not believed would.¹⁰

Does Douven's proposal cover these further Moorean absurd thoughts?

(4) None of the guests will smoke, but I have no reason to believe this.

(5) One of the guests will try to steal my grandfather's ashes, but I'm justified in believing that she won't.

No thinker can be both more confident than not that she does not believe p while being at least as confident that she believes p as she is that she does not.

⁸ Here is a speculative idea that is close to Douven's proposal concerning (1). (Caveat: the proposal is one that neither Douven nor I might endorse.) Recall that (2) has this form: $(p \ \& \ B \sim p)$. By RB1 and RB3, we get that it's rational to believe this only if it's at least as likely as not that the thinker believes p . By RB1 and RB2, it is more likely than not that the thinker believes $\sim p$. The thinker knows a priori that any belief set that contains both beliefs (i.e., the belief that p and the belief that $\sim p$) will either violate RB1 or fail to be probabilistically coherent. Thus, the thinker can see that if she had the beliefs that (2) says that it's more than likely not she has, she has a set of beliefs that no rational thinker can have. Does that mean that it's not possible to rationally believe (2), though? That is not entirely clear. Is this another case where the difference between the omissive and commissive case causes trouble for an attractive proposal? I cannot say that I don't believe that it might be.

⁹ Williamson's (2014) examples of improbable knowledge call this principle into question.

¹⁰ Recall the form of (3) was $(p \ \& \ \sim K p)$. By RB1 and RB4, the thinker who rationally believes p must be rational to be just as confident that she knows as she is that she does not. By RB1 and RB2, the thinker must be more confident than not that she does not know that p . Hence the conflict.

Perhaps. If we know a priori, say, that it's not possible to know the first conjunct of (4) when there is no reason to believe it, the account of (3) covers (4). The case of (5) is less straightforward, but with some work it would seem that the proposal covers this case, too.¹¹

One reasonable worry about this account is that it doesn't seem particularly economical. Like Moore's account earlier, it seems that we need to import quite a few assumptions to make the account extensionally adequate. It isn't clear that the justification for these assumptions could be found in anything like the weak assumptions connecting rational belief to rational degrees of confidence along the lines of (RB1)–(RB3). The addition of (RB4) in particular might seem ad hoc. Suppose, say, the reason that you are attracted to (RB1) and (RB2) is that you accept some sort of Lockean approach to rational belief, one on which rational full beliefs are rational when they are because such beliefs are nothing but high degrees of confidence and that such degrees of confidence are made rational by the evidence. Such accounts predict that it's rational to believe lottery propositions even if we know that we cannot know that they are true. Indeed, such accounts predict that some versions of (3) are rationally credible:

(3') This ticket will lose, but I don't know whether it will.¹²

On the assumption that the rationally credible beliefs are that way whenever they are at least as probable as other rationally credible beliefs, (3') should be at least as rationally credible as, say, the beliefs we form about cricket and football scores when we read the newspaper.¹³

¹¹ The form of (5) is $(p \ \& \ JB \sim p)$. It would seem that we can know a priori that no body of evidence that makes it rational to believe $\sim p$ makes it rational to believe p . Thus, the thinker can know a priori that if $JB \sim p$, $\sim JB p$. The thinker also knows a priori that if $\sim JB p$, $\sim K p$. By the reasoning just sketched earlier used for (3), we can cover this case, too.

¹² See [Littlejohn \(2015\)](#).

¹³ See [Harman \(1968\)](#).

We might look elsewhere to find a more economical account that would cover all the cases considered thus far. Consider, for example, the knowledge norm of belief:

KNB: One should not believe p unless one knows p .¹⁴

If we cannot know (1)–(5), the account would predict that each of the Moorean absurd thoughts we’ve considered violates this putative epistemic norm.¹⁵ It should be noted that a thinker might contravene this norm without absurdity or incoherence if she does so unwittingly. I do not think that anyone thinks that every belief that violates this norm should have the properties distinctive of Moorean absurd thoughts. The proposal on offer is that it would be absurd to believe things that we know (or should know) would violate KNB.¹⁶ Thus, believing that one has hands when one is a BIV is not absurd in the way that believing (3) would be.

¹⁴ See [Williamson \(2000\)](#). [Huemer \(2007\)](#) appeals to something similar to KNB and says that we can account for Moorean absurd belief by appeal to the idea that we’re rationally required to abandon beliefs that do not, by our lights, pass a comprehensive epistemic evaluation. The knowledge standard is the standard operative in that evaluation.

¹⁵ Notice that (2) does not fit the pattern of the others. Recall the form of (2) is $(p \ \& \ B \sim p)$. This thought could only satisfy the norm KNB if a thinker could know p and know that she believed $\sim p$. It is not obvious that a thinker could not know both things. What she does know a priori, however, is that her beliefs about p cannot both be knowledge. Thus, if she knew that KNB governed belief, she would know a priori that in any world she ought not believe p or ought not believe $\sim p$. Believing (2) ensures that she violates this norm one way or the other even if the object of this belief is something that she could know.

¹⁶ The qualification is needed here to deal with the fact that a thinker might not realize that, say, she cannot know the proposition expressed by “It is raining, but nobody knows that.” The idea is that a thinker should see, with minimal reflection, that such a thing cannot be known even if she does not know this because she has not reflected or because she fails to grasp some a priori truth about what

Critics have claimed that KNB is too strong by pointing to cases of undetectable error or various cases involving epistemic luck.¹⁷ In the typical presentation of these objections, people say that they respond positively to thinkers even when they unwittingly violate the norm. It isn't clear whether we should take these positive responses as evidence that thinkers should be excused for violating some norm or whether there was no norm violated. At any rate, the literature contains a number of alternative proposals about what the fundamental epistemic norm is that are less demanding than KNB:

TNB: One should not believe p unless p .¹⁸

ENB: One should not believe p unless one has sufficient evidence that p .¹⁹

Let's briefly consider both of these approaches.

TNB has some of the same externalist implications as KNB. Readers have to decide for themselves whether this is an asset or liability. It differs from KNB in that it doesn't seem to say that a thinker shouldn't believe in certain environmental luck cases. Again, readers have to decide whether they think of this as a weakness or a strength. One problem with TNB is that it seems to offer no straightforward explanation of (3)–(5). In response, some proponents of a truth-centric account have suggested that TNB can cover the terrain because various derivative normative requirements follow on from this fundamental one.²⁰ As Williamson (2000) suggests, if TNB is among the norms that govern assertion, it would be negligent to assert without good

can be known. The idea would be that it would be irrational to hold beliefs when a priori reflection is enough to put a thinker in a position to know that the proposition cannot be known by them.

¹⁷ See [Brown \(2010\)](#) and [Lackey \(2007\)](#).

¹⁸ See [Whiting \(2013\)](#).

¹⁹ See [Conee and Feldman \(2004\)](#).

²⁰ See [MacKinnon \(2015\)](#) for a recent discussion of this strategy and [Littlejohn \(2013\)](#) for criticism of trying to derive ancillary norms from TNB to account for all the dimensions of epistemic assessment.

evidence or when confronted with evidence to the contrary. If so, it might be natural for anyone who takes TNB to be the fundamental norm for belief to take ENB to be a derivative epistemic norm.

Let me note three concerns about this truth-centric approach. First, if the account is strong enough to explain why we shouldn't believe in Gettier-type cases, it suffers from all the problems of a knowledge-centric approach. If it's too weak to account for the Gettier-type cases, this might be the problem with the account—it doesn't account for the sense in which a thinker shouldn't believe p when she is systematically disconnected from reality in the cases where she gets things right and thus predicts that there is some important normative difference between the false beliefs that a BIV forms about her environment and the accidentally true ones. Second, it is obscure how the derivation should work at all since we do not see similar structures of derivative norms in other domains. Third, it is unlikely that the truth-centric account can account for our intuitive judgments about when a thinker has or lacks sufficient evidence for her beliefs. Why should we think, for example, that if TNB is the fundamental epistemic norm, there should be something wrong with believing lottery propositions when there seems to be nothing wrong with believing things on the basis of testimony that is more likely to err?

Readers should know that if they want an internalist view of epistemic norms, one that denies that external conditions have normative significance, there are internalist-friendly formulations of the knowledge-centric view that have been defended in the literature. Huemer (2007), for example, has argued that we're rationally required to think of our beliefs as meeting the knowledge standard. On his view, certain Moorean absurdities are irrational because we cannot think of the relevant beliefs as being beliefs that meet this standard. Bird (2007), to pick another example, has argued that what's rational or justified to believe can include things we do not know. On his view, the justified belief is the belief that is either knowledge or only fails to be because of something extrinsic to the thinker and the way she forms her beliefs. The conditions that make a case a Gettier-type case are extrinsic to the thinker and the way she forms her

beliefs, so on this account a thinker can rationally or justifiably believe p even if the belief doesn't constitute knowledge. What the view rules out is the possibility of justified or rational belief in cases where a thinker's belief is based on the kinds of grounds where the thinker can know a priori that the relevant belief violates the knowledge standard. This means that all the Moorean absurdities count as irrational or unjustified.

3. On the Bridge to Assertion

Suppose that some account accounts for the absurdity of believing (1)–(5). What does this tell us about assertion? Shoemaker thinks that this account of Moorean absurd thought will give us the desired account of Moorean absurd speech, “via the principle that what one can believe constrains what one can assert” (1996, 213). Mind the “can.” As we saw earlier, there was some disagreement about whether it is possible for a thinker to have the attitudes expressed by an assertive utterance of (1)–(5) and whether it is possible for a thinker to rationally hold these attitudes. This suggests that the proper order of explanation is from thought to speech and that a complete account of the absurdity of the relevant beliefs gives us the tools we need to account for the absurdity of the speech.

While the first point seems eminently plausible, the second point is a point of controversy. Bach and Harnish (1979) defend the idea that one should assert only what one believes. This sincerity norm might seem to function as a kind of bridge principle: if one should only assert what one believes and it would be absurd to believe (1)–(5), the absurdity of asserting (1)–(5) is accounted for.

There is a gap in this reasoning that is supposed to establish a link between the norms that govern belief and assertion. Even if we grant that anyone who asserts (1)–(5) would express attitudes that violate some normative standard, the sincerity norm wouldn't give us the tools we need to account for the absurdity of speech unless we were to assume that it would *also* be

absurd to contravene the operative normative standards that govern speech. It seems we have little reason to believe this. We have no reason (yet, at any rate) to believe that the standards that govern belief and assertion have the same or similar rational authority. For all that's been said, there are categorical norms that apply to all thinkers that tell us that we shouldn't believe (1)–(5) and no such norm that governs our assertions.

Because there is a potential gap here, it's not clear why we should believe there is a bridge that takes us from a satisfactory account of absurd thought to a satisfactory account of absurd speech.²¹ Williams (2013) takes this worry a step further by arguing that we have positive reason to believe no such bridge exists. He notes that assertions are acts and that they should be assessed in terms of practical reasons. The problem with the bridge principle is that it seems to assume that the reasons that would make it irrational to believe p are the reasons to focus on in determining whether it would be absurd to assert p , but this overlooks the role that practical reasons play in determining what would be rational to assert. Everyone agrees that it can be rational to shut up from time to time even if you have some knowledge that you would want to share with the world. And everyone but Kant seems to agree that it can be rational to assert what you don't believe or know to be false if there is overriding practical reason to do so. So why should we expect that the proper and complete explanation as to why it would be absurd to assert something should come from the account as to why it's irrational to believe something?

Williams points to examples where it seems perfectly sensible to assert something that no sensible person can believe. Let's consider one:

²¹ Notice that the relevant gap (if real) cannot be closed even if we adopt a view on which the link between belief and assertion is so intimate that it is impossible to assert p if one does not believe p (e.g., see [Rosenthal 1995](#)). For even if belief is a necessary condition for something else, that doesn't make the further thing evaluable by reference to epistemic norms in a way that would warrant saying that this further thing has the good or bad epistemic properties of the required belief.

Suppose that I have the long-standing belief that people are following me. As my therapist, you bring me to the recognition that my belief is epistemically irrational, because I have no reason for it. Nonetheless I find myself unable to discard the epistemically irrational belief. So I try to inform you that I still have it for no reason, with the larger aim of getting you to rid me of it. I could try telling you, “People are following me,” adding “although I have no reason to believe this” ... The result is that you should think that I have the irrational belief that people are still following me. Since my aim is getting you to think this, I am practically rational in making the assertion. (2013, 1128)

One conservative lesson to take from the example is that there must be something more or different to absurd speech than absurd belief. It is not absurd for a speaker who needs to draw attention to the absurdity of some set of attitudes to use the speech that expresses those attitudes to say such a thing. Once the existence of the gap is acknowledged, we see that it is a nontrivial task to explain why it is absurd to assert (1)–(5) when it is indeed absurd to do so.

Once we see that this task might be nontrivial, we should also be open to the possibility that the general theoretical orientation we have been pursuing has been mistaken. The bridge principle was initially attractive because it seemed that the thing that made absurd speech absurd was some connection to absurd belief which this assertion would serve to express. This fixation on belief might be misleading, not only because the full story about absurd speech might need to draw on additional resources, but also because the relevant kind of absurdity might not be limited to that which we can assess for accuracy. Woods proposes that there are Moorean absurdities that are neither beliefs nor assertions:

(6) I promise I’ll marry you, but I won’t. (forthcoming, 1)

If this is a Moorean absurdity and promising doesn’t require believing, we have Moorean absurdity without belief or the expression of it by means of assertion. Woods proposes that there

is a more basic form of absurdity that attaches to (6) that is found in other more familiar Moorean absurdities (e.g., belief in or assertion of (1)–(5)). For him, the clash in (6) has to do with a clash of commitments—to marrying the person being addressed and to the falsity of the proposition that the speaker shall marry the person being addressed.²²

This commitment-theoretic approach might be helpful for getting a grip on Williams’s example. A clearer understanding of the speaker’s commitments can help us see why there is a connection between sayings with a certain form and absurd speech acts. Absurd belief might also be seen as a special case of this more general kind of absurdity generating clash of commitments. It might help us see why we can rightly bracket examples where a speaker ascribes or takes herself to have an attitude that she only accesses via therapy or publicly available evidence are not cases of Moorean absurdity in spite of the superficial similarity between Moore’s examples and, say, Hajek’s (2007) and Turri’s (2010) example of an eliminativist who says/believes things with the form of (1) on the grounds that her theory implies that she has no beliefs.

4. On Assertion

How do we account for the absurdity of asserting (1)–(5)? The account we offer must surely be sensitive to what assertion is. Unfortunately, there is no settled view on what assertion is, much less consensus on whether there is some single type of act that “assertion” picks out.²³

On the normative accounts of assertion, a saying counts as an assertion because it is governed by a rule or norm, such as one that enjoins us to be sincere, to avoid asserting something false, or one that enjoins us to assert only what we know.²⁴ The accounts differ in

²² For further discussion of a commitment-theoretic approach, see [Coliva \(2015\)](#).

²³ See [Cappelen \(2011\)](#) for skepticism.

²⁴ [Williamson \(2000\)](#) is often identified in the literature as a proponent of such an approach.

terms of the content of the rule or norms that they take to govern assertion, but they share in common this idea that some such norm or rule is constitutive of the speech act of assertion.

Of the extant accounts, it might seem that the knowledge account is the most promising account because as we've seen it seems to be uniquely well positioned to explain why (1)–(5) can be absurd if asserted:

KNA: One should not assert that p unless one knows p .²⁵

One challenge to the knowledge account is that it might struggle to explain why these should count as yet another Moorean absurdity:

(7) There are no olives left, but it is not certain that this is so.

(8) Agnes just left the flat, but I'm not certain that she did.

If certainty isn't necessary for knowledge, it would seem that the knowledge account might fail to account for Moorean absurd speech and thought that pertains to various kinds of uncertainty.²⁶ On its face, it does seem plausible that this kind of certainty is *not* necessary for knowledge. (Notice that it does not seem redundant to say "Not only that, I'm certain of it," after saying that I know that Agnes left the flat.)

One response to this challenge would be to argue that while knowledge does not require certainty, knowledge is sufficient for rational certainty. If a thinker's rational degree of confidence and the strength of the thinker's epistemic position are determined by her evidence and her evidence just is her knowledge, it seems that everything she knows should be certain and everything that she believes the thinker can rightly be certain of. If so, it isn't clear that we need additional resources to explain why (7) or (8) should be odd. A thinker should be certain of what

²⁵ Needless to say, the knowledge account has a number of detractors. The objections to KNA are similar to the objections to KNB. The defensive responses are also similar.

²⁶ See [Beddor \(2016\)](#) and [Stanley \(2008\)](#) for discussion.

she knows and should not think that it is not certain that p is true when p is an obvious logical consequence of her total evidence.

Perhaps the most significant challenges to the normative account of Moorean absurd speech is that we have just seen that not every assertive utterance of (1), say, is a Moorean absurdity. If every utterance of (1) violates the constitutive norm of assertion and this violation is supposed to account for the absurdity of Moorean absurd speech, we face the unfortunate dilemma that this account either predicts too much or too little absurd speech. Thus, even if the normative account of assertion can survive the objection that being governed by a norm like the knowledge norm is not what is constitutive of assertion, it seems that the normative account is incomplete at best.

Might these problems be avoided on an account of absurd speech that draws on the resources of communicative intentions accounts of assertion? On one such account, defended by Bach and Harnish (1979), a speaker asserts p when she expresses her belief that p is true with an intention that the speaker believes what she asserts. On its face, it seems that it would be irrational to assert (1)–(5) with the intention that the audience believe what one asserts if one believes that the audience is too rational to believe such things. One problem with such accounts, however, is with its treatment of cases where a speaker appears to assert something without the relevant intention. Williams's example comes to mind here.

A relatively novel account of assertion has been proposed by Pagin (2011). It seems to avoid some of the difficulties that arise for alternative accounts of assertion and might have just the features we need to cover the full range of cases. On his proposal, an utterance counts as an assertion when it is *prima facie* informative. An utterance is informative iff the speaker utters what she does partly because it is true. A speaker can assert p without it being informative (e.g., the speaker can assert falsehoods wittingly or unwittingly). What's crucial here is that the

assertion is prima facie informative—that it is prima facie taken as true so that there is a seemingly valid inference from the speaker’s saying p to p being true (Pagin 2008, 51).²⁷

In the case where the speaker intends to assert something to an audience with an intention to convey information, her assertion should not defeat the appearance that the saying of “ p ” carries the information that p . She must not create the appearance that she is not saying “ p ” because, in part, p . Consider (1f)–(3f) again:

(1f) $p \ \& \ \sim Bp$

(2f) $p \ \& \ B\sim p$

(3f) $p \ \& \ \sim Kp$

Let’s start with (3f) because it can shed light on (1f). As a general rule, a thinker’s reasons for ϕ -ing depend upon what the thinker knows.²⁸ (Or, if you prefer, our description of a thinker’s reasons for ϕ -ing depend upon what we’re willing to say a speaker “knows.”) If a thinker’s reason for ϕ -ing was that p , the speaker ϕ ’d because p and the speaker knew that p . If the speaker couldn’t have known that p , the speaker’s reason couldn’t have been that p and the speaker couldn’t have ϕ ’d because p .

In a context where we would assume that the assertion is informative about whether p only if the speaker’s assertion is connected to the speaker’s intention to state how things are, we can

²⁷ Let me note one point that I overlooked, which I owe to Sandy Goldberg. Alternative accounts of assertion can help themselves to Pagin’s account of Moorean absurdity if these accounts, too, imply that assertions are prima facie informative. Accounts of assertion that posit a noncontingent connection between assertion and belief (e.g., [Goldberg 2015](#)) seem to give us the result that assertions are prima facie informative and so they, too, can offer an account of Moorean absurdity along the lines of Pagin’s. For further discussion of assertion and informativeness, see Owens (2006).

²⁸ As noted by [Unger \(1975\)](#). For further defense, see [Alvarez \(2010\)](#) and [Hyman \(1999\)](#).

reason as follows: Either the speaker doesn't know p or she does. If she does, (3f) is false and thus isn't informative. If the speaker doesn't know that p , the speaker's reason for speaking couldn't be that p and thus this isn't informative. Thus, (3f) isn't informative. Now consider (1f). Because believing p is necessary for knowing p , the same reasoning can be applied again to establish that (1f) cannot be informative.

Here Pagin notes that if the speaker both believes p and believes $\sim p$, she is not a reliable source of information about whether p . If, however, the speaker believes $\sim p$ but does not believe p , this would just be the omissive case again. Either way, the audience cannot take the utterance of (2f) to be an indication of whether p .

In some cases, we don't think that the speaker's asserting p would only be informative if the speaker herself believed what she said. Lackey's (2008) creationist teacher and racist juror, for example, assert things that they clearly do not believe and do not know, but the audience might nevertheless take them to be informative. One nice feature of Pagin's approach is that it seems to leave room for a possibility that Williams drew our attention to earlier, which is that there can be cases where a speaker asserts (1)–(3) without absurdity.

How does this account square with the idea that Moorean absurdity is due to irrationality? Pagin needn't deny that there is some close connection between irrationality and absurdity, but his account is officially that the problematic assertions are uninformative. We can bring these approaches closer together by thinking about the intentions of the speaker or the expectations of the audience and whether the speaker and/or audience can rationally take the assertions to fulfil their apparent communicative intentions. Perhaps it is the clash between the intention to say something informative or the expectation that something informative was being offered and the form of the Moorean absurdities that accounts for the apparent irrationality when it is present.²⁹

²⁹ I would like to thank Jack Woods for discussing these issues and Sanford Goldberg for very helpful feedback on an earlier draft.

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